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6 Surprising Pain Triggers

Whether you have chronic pain, throbbing joints, or tension headaches, check out these simple ways to conquer common causes of aches

Holly Cassandra Corbett, Prevention

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You can't see pain, but when you feel it, it's difficult to think about much else. Mother Nature has good reason for that. "Pain is like the oil light on your car's dashboard: It signals that your body needs attention," says Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, author of *Real Cause, Real Cure* (Rodale) and *Pain Free 1-2-3-A Proven Program for Eliminating Chronic Pain Now* (McGraw-Hill). "Most doctors prescribe medicines to mask the pain. A better solution is to treat the problem."

Whether you have chronic pain that's lasted for at least 6 months or acute pain from an injury or overuse, you don't have to keep popping pain relievers or suffer through it by touching it out. Check out these six surprising pain triggers and discover how to fix them to help you stay ache-free.

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- 5 Reasons It Hurts Down There
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Pain Trigger #1: Anger

Holding in anger can be a pain in your back—literally. In one study, people with chronic lower-back pain were harassed and then asked to either verbally express their anger or hold it in. Those who kept tight-lipped experienced more tension in the muscles along their spine, according to *Psychosomatic Medicine*. Tight muscles hurt whether you have ongoing back pain or aches from lifting too much, so follow the old adage and blow off some steam.

Avoid Aches: Don't Resist Your Feelings

One trick to minimize pain is to allow yourself to fully feel what you're feeling, says Dr. Teitelbaum. If you try to suppress anger, you'll only store hostile feelings in your muscles as tension and increase the hurt. And focusing your attention on trying to understand or justify feelings shifts you out of your feelings and into your mind so you never really release anger. The next time you see red, pay attention to whether your jaw is tightening or your breathing is getting shallower. These are signs that you're resisting your feelings, so do the opposite and let your jaw go slack or take deep breaths. Find a private place where you can allow yourself to really feel your anger and have a good hissy fit to release your emotions—and ward off tension in your back.

Pain Trigger #2: Your Smartphone

Your cell may make it easier to stay connected to friends, surf the Web, and pound out quick texts, but it could also be a source of pain. If you hold your cell between your shoulder and your ear so you can multitask when talking, it forces your neck to be held in what is called the "lateral bending position" for long periods of time, says Dr. Teitelbaum. This causes neck and shoulder aches—and even tingling down your arm. Also, texting often can lead to tendonitis in your thumb.

Avoid Aches: Change Positions

If you're going to be talking for more than a few minutes, use a headset or Bluetooth instead of cradling your cell with your shoulder to avoid a neck-wrenching position. When texting, use the pad of your thumb instead of the tip. "Pressing down with the tip keeps your thumb continuously flexed so you overwork tendons that can trigger pain later on," says Dr. Teitelbaum.

Pain Trigger #3: Thinking the Worst

Catastrophizing, or believing that a situation is much worse than it is, can result in more stress and interfere in one's ability to function well on a day-to-day basis. Multiple studies have linked catastrophizing to a heightened perception of pain. "Emotion and pain are processed in the same area of the brain, so if you're anxious or stressed, it's natural to feel physical pain," says Andrew Bertagnoli, PhD, a member of the board of directors at the American Chronic Pain Association and psychologist in group practice at the Spine Care Medical Group. "That's not to say your pain is emotional; it's just that there's an intersection of the mind and body."

Avoid Aches: Have Daily Worry Time

"Catastrophizing traps us in circular thinking and makes us feel helpless. When we catastrophize, we are focused on our worries rather than on finding solutions," says Nomita Sonty, PhD, associate clinical professor in the division of pain medicine of the anesthesiology department at Columbia University. "This type of thinking makes us feel less in control and increases stress that can result in the worsening of physical pain, such as tension headaches." Dr. Sonty recommends this worry-time technique to keep you from getting stuck in a worry cycle and shift to problem-solving:

8hul; Set aside 10 minutes to let yourself worry in the middle of every day (not when you first wake up or before you go to bed).

8hul; Write down everything you're worried about, from not having enough money in your 401(k) to your neighbor not liking you.

8hul; Prioritize your worries according to what you can solve today, what you can solve this week or month, and what you can't change at all.

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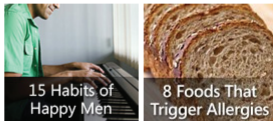
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8bul; Come up with an action plan for the things that you wish to change. This switches your focus from ruminating to doing, so you feel more in control.

8bul; Cross off and then let go of the things that you can't change.

If you wake up in the morning and start worrying, stop yourself until it's your worry time. This technique trains you to postpone worrying so you don't get caught up in circular thinking and helps to minimize stress and tension.

Pain Trigger #4: Skimping on Sleep

You've got e-mails to answer, closets to clean, and lunches to pack. But if you're putting sleep at the bottom of your to-do list, you're going to suffer. "In the pre-Internet days, Americans slept 9 hours a night. Today we average less than 6 1/2 hours," says Dr. Teitelbaum. "Your body makes human growth hormone during sleep, which is needed for tissue repair to ease pain." Moreover, people with chronic insomnia have nearly three times the risk of chronic pain, according to the journal Sleep.

20 Ways To Sleep Better Every Night

Avoid Aches: Hypnotize Yourself

Falling asleep when you're aching can seem like mission impossible, but self-hypnosis techniques have been shown to both decrease pain and improve sleep quality. Hypnosis is simply becoming absorbed in a single object (like a candle's flame), image (think: being on a beach), or idea (such as a word or phrase). It works because when you focus your attention on something absorbing, the mind becomes more calm and open to suggestions. "Hypnosis lessens overall brain activity—including in the areas linked to feelings of anxiety—so you feel more relaxed," says Mark P. Jensen, PhD, vice chair for research in the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine at the University of Washington, and author of *Hypnosis for Chronic Pain Management: Patient Workbook* (Oxford University Press).

To fall asleep faster, Dr. Jensen recommends trying this simple 3-2-1 technique. First, listen for three things (such as the hum of your air conditioner or your partner's breathing). Next, see three things (think about images of your favorite place or a big blue sky). After that, feel three things (maybe soft sheets against your skin, a cool breeze from an open window). Repeat by listening, seeing, and feeling two things, and then go down to one thing each. It's okay to lose count as you begin to drift off—just start over and keep repeating until you're fully asleep.

Pain Trigger #5: Your Work Area

You might not think that simply sitting at your desk can up your pain risk since it doesn't feel like you're doing anything physically strenuous, but everything from your posture to the way your work area is set up could potentially cause injury. Carrying your shoulders up around your ears from being stressed tightens your shoulder and neck muscles to trigger aches. Resting your wrists on your keyboard without proper support can lead to sharp, shooting pains in your wrist and hands known as carpal tunnel syndrome. Sitting in a chair with no back support or that doesn't allow your feet to touch the floor can put added strain on your spine.

Avoid Aches: Makeover Your Space

Protecting yourself from numbness, stiffness, and cramping is as easy as making a few small adjustments to your desk.

8bul; First, stick a blue dot on your computer monitor and look at it every so often to remind yourself to relax your shoulders if you're the type to raise them up toward your ears when stressed.

8bul; Next, check how you sit at your computer. The top of your monitor should be at or slightly below eye level so you're not straining your neck to look up.

8bul; Your wrists and elbows should be supported and your keyboard should be about arm's length away from your body when your elbows are bent.

8bul; Your knees should be bent at a 90-degree angle. If your feet don't touch the floor, get a stool to rest your feet.

Pain Trigger #6: Loneliness

You know that old Streisand song that says people who need people are the luckiest people in the world? Well, denying those needs can lead to physical pain. "Experiencing chronic pain can be a very isolating experience," says Dr. Bertagnoli. "We're social creatures, but pain can make you withdraw from others around you and may lead to feelings of depression—which has been linked to increased pain."

Avoid Aches: Nurture Your Connections

"People who have good social support, and use it well, manage their pain better," says Dr. Sonty. "It's essential to get out and do as much as you can so you don't become isolated." Rather than, say, skip a friend's party altogether because you don't think you can handle sitting for 5 hours, make it a point to go and stay for only an hour. Also, support groups can remind you that you're not alone and give you advice on how to better manage pain. Visit the American Chronic Pain Association to find one near you.

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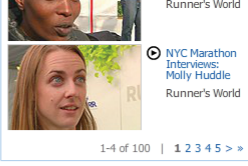
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